JUST THE FACTS

CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS AT SCHOOL

AN EDUCATIONAL FACT SHEET FROM
THE FLORIDA ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION

Children who grow up in alcoholic families are three to five times more likely than other children to develop alcoholism, drug dependence, eating disorders or other addictive/compulsive behaviors later in life. The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) estimates there are 28 million children of alcoholics in the United States, 7 million of whom are under the age of 18. Approximately one in eight Americans is the child of an alcoholic, but only a small percentage of school-age children of alcoholics get help.

A PORTRAIT OF JENNIE

Eight-year-old Jennie lives in an alcoholic home. She's a quiet child often overlooked by her teachers. She seems withdrawn and depressed, does not act out and has very few friends. Someone who watches Jennie closely may glimpse a trace of creativity in her art or drama, something that shows she is unique. Jennie seems to struggle with verbal and written skills. She generally stays alone on the playground. Other children sometimes tease or pick on her. She does not get involved when other children are picked on. Looking carefully, one notices her isolation. She attracts no attention. Jennie constantly feels rejected, hurt and anxious. She feels unimportant, unloved.

At school, Jennie doesn't appear to be a problem student. But the role she has adopted to help her cope with life in an alcoholic family makes her prone to addictions. She is likely to have difficulty with ongoing relationships and to feel isolated and alone. Jennie may be a candidate for teenage suicide. Her high level of anxiety makes it difficult for her to learn since she has a hard time relaxing. Jennie tries to be invisible. She is determined to pass through life unnoticed, believing that this is the safest course to avoid violence, anger and rejection.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN THE ALCOHOLIC FAMILY

Each child is affected by alcoholism differently — depending on the age of the child at the onset of the parent's alcoholism, the child's sex, the frequency of drinking, the presence of violence in the home, and the child's perception of the alcoholism.

Children who live in alcoholic families are often less mature emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually than their peers. They have no appropriate role models. The child may not receive adequate physical care and must take care of him- or herself.

An alcoholic family does not foster or allow the expression of feelings, so the child's emotional development is hampered. The child suffers intellectually because the alcoholic parent is not available. The reading level of a child is directly related to the amount of reading he sees his parents doing or encouraging. An alcoholic parent spends little time reading to a child. There is also little time spent in dialogue or discussion to challenge and encourage the child's intellectual growth.

Spiritually, there is usually a lack of discipline to utilize rituals or discuss religion in the family because the central and most important focus is the alcoholism.

ROLES FOR SURVIVAL

Author Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse, M.A., defines four specific roles adopted by children of alcoholics: hero, scapegoat, lost child and mascot. Most children of alcoholics will adopt one or a combination of roles in order to feel safe and in control. It may be hard for the child to act outside of the role he has adopted. Hidden inside, the child feels shame, guilt and in crisis, but he often avoids expressing any feelings.

THE HERO

The child hero is a volunteer, is responsible, and wants to be the best. Heros tend to be leaders, are controlling, rigid around other students, and need to help people and gain attention. In athletic competition, they exhibit poor sportsmanship because winning is so important. The hero may be obnoxious and is often referred to as a teacher's pet.

The hero needs structure and order. It is important to help this child learn that it is okay to make a mistake, to get less than 100 percent, or to not always try to have needs met through attention and approval. Teachers can help heros learn to share the conversation instead of monopolizing it.

Heros should be encouraged to allow others to lead. When paying the hero a compliment, separate the behavior or achievement from the person. Let him know he is cared about no matter what he has done.

THE SCAPEGOAT

The scapegoat is easily recognized in school: he disturbs classes, breaks rules, talks back, rarely does schoolwork, is irresponsible, blames others, is generally hostile and defiant, and is often referred to special education. The scapegoat becomes the center of attention in the classroom and in the family. Through this behavior, a child gets attention, feels significant and powerful.

Teachers must set clear limits for the scapegoat and help him see that choices have consequences and that he is responsible for his behavior. The teacher must disengage himself from the anger and frustration of the scapegoat child. Encourage this child to take a leadership role. Be calm and clear with a sense of control whenever dealing with a defiant child. Keep promises.

Teachers must resist the temptation to rescue the scapegoat from painful situations. It is important not to feel sorry for him. This would give the child more attention and enable him to continue deviant behavior. Insist that children obey classroom rules. Work with them to increase their attention span, which is generally low. Teachers must avoid confrontations with this child in front of other students, because the scapegoat thrives on negative attention. One-on-one interaction is more effective.

THE LOST CHILD

The lost child, like Jennie who has been described, has decided not to make waves. The lost child is not talkative. The lost child will stay in the middle rather than getting an A or an F so as not to attract attention. The lost child has a short attention span and may create a whole fantasy world during a time of stress, thereby disconnecting from his emotional world. He will not volunteer to answer questions in class, but will answer if called upon.

High teacher-student ratios make dealing with the lost child more difficult. This child of the alcoholic tends to get lost easily in big classes. To create options for the lost child, teachers should try to make contact one on one, find out who he is and what his interests are. Listen intently to what life is like for him. Recognize the creative side in these children. Encourage them to work in small groups. Help them build relationships with other students in the classroom. Call upon them to answer questions. Prepare them to be leaders. Encourage them to get involved in extracurricular activities.

THE MASCOT

During times of stress in the classroom the mascot becomes a class clown. The mascot will talk without raising his hand, tries to encourage laughter or look like a fool. The mascot has learned this survival role to diffuse stress and feels significant and powerful when making people laugh.

Teachers must set clear and specific limits with the mascot and should not get involved in the laughter of the students. Encourage the mascot to be a leader, to raise his hand and be responsible. Give strokes when the mascot has been appropriately humorous. Help the mascot attain a position of importance in the class or in the school.

Children of alcoholics do not choose these roles but adopt them as a means of survival. This is particularly evident during times of stress. The classroom is often an area of stress for children. They benefit when given a wider range of options to help them cope within their environment.

By listening and remaining calm, teachers may be able to influence children of alcoholics to seek help in support groups like Ala-Teen or a Student Assistance Program. A support group encourages a child to talk about what it is like to live in an alcoholic home and helps him learn to trust other students, express feelings, and understand the origin of feelings. Support groups help children relate to peers and adults positively. When they learn that alcohol and drug abuse are "diseases," it decreases their pain and sense of responsibility for the problems in the family. They feel less anxious and less burdened with life. With this awareness, school performance often improves.

CONCLUSION

The teacher can help change the child of an alcoholic's view that he is sick and dysfunctional. The teacher can confirm that he is experiencing normal reactions to an abnormal situation. The inconsistency, unpredictability, and lack of dependability which are characteristic of alcoholic homes can make a child fearful, confused, anxious, and overly vigilant. Teachers can help these children by encouraging them to use their imagination, be creative, laugh and be playful. Teachers acting as nurturing adults can encourage a trusting and supportive relationship in the classroom. This creates more options and challenges children to abandon their old survival techniques and develop healthy, new attitudes.

Florida's Choice
DRUG-FREE

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL THE FLORIDA ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION RESOURCE CENTER
1030 EAST LAFAYETTE STREET, SUITE 100, TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA 32301 TEL: (850) 878-2196 • WWW.FADAA.ORG

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